

WRC statement on the CSW68 agreed conclusions

The 68th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the main intergovernmental body dedicated to gender equality, came to a close on Wednesday, 27 March 2024.

The Women's Rights Caucus (WRC)—a global intersectional feminist coalition of more than 400 organizations, networks, and individuals that advocates for gender equality at the United Nations—welcomes the adoption of the CSW agreed conclusions around the theme, “Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective”.

The outcome of the conference marks the renewal of a global commitment to achieving inclusive gender equality and continued multilateral support to advance the human rights of women and girls in all their diversity.

In a press conference held before the adoption of the agreed conclusions on Friday, members of the WRC laid out their CSW68 priorities, which include economic justice, specifically concerning tax, debt and trade, climate justice, and gender justice, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

“We visualized a dismantling of hierarchies and inequities as the starting point of CSW68 to create a global, social and economic contract, from a decolonial and feminist lens, that centers human rights and care, the right to self-determination and sovereignty, reparatory justice, and built from the heart of the struggles and oppressions of the most marginalized, vulnerable, and the colonized, in the Global South,” said Maitree Muzumdar of Feminist Manch (India) and the Young Feminist Caucus, a co-convenor of the WRC. “Effective mobilization and collective action require addressing the root causes of poverty and radically shifting how economic and financial structures are imagined, by challenging the exponential growth of developed countries and the concentration of wealth in the hands of few.

Economic Justice

“Women are doubly burdened with unpaid caregiving responsibilities amidst dwindling wages and the soaring cost of living. Social protection has been greatly affected due to state budget cuts. Decreasing public financing and support to social services and instead shifting funds to service debt is deplorable and unacceptable as social protection is not an act of charity, the state has a responsibility to ensure the well-being of its citizens,” said Tharanga de Silva of the Women and Media Collective in Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, Tharanga adds, “Wealthy elites and corporations are often protected and prioritized in the state-proposed taxation rates and/or tax holidays. These mechanisms allow illicit financial flows and tax havens for the rich, while the poor sink further into debt and face issues such as malnutrition. It's crucial to implement innovative sources of public finance such as a global financial transaction tax, redirection of military budgets, and additional taxes on arms trade.”

In line with our analysis, the WRC is encouraged to see progress made in the following areas as reflected in the language of the agreed conclusions adopted last Friday:

- *Tax*. Improving international tax cooperation and curbing illicit financial flows to expand fiscal space and direct resources to women and girls, assessing the impacts of tax policies on women and girls, increasing the progressivity of tax policies with a focus on taxing those with the highest ability to pay, including via wealth and corporate taxation, and preventing regressive taxation that disproportionately impacts women with low or no incomes, and eliminating “pink tax”.
- *Debt*. Improving international debt mechanisms to support debt review, debt payment suspensions, and debt restructuring and recognizing the important role, on a case-by-case basis, of debt relief, including debt cancellation, and debt restructuring as debt crisis prevention, management, and resolution tools, and as measures that can enhance fiscal space for investments for all woman and girls living.
- *Care*. Recognizing, reducing, and redistributing women’s and girls’ disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work, including through sustained investments in the care economy and by promoting work-life balance, and by taking steps to measure the value of this work to determine its contribution to the national economy, and stressing the role of member states as the main bearer of responsibility in “strengthen[ing] care and support systems, including the care economy, in which all receive the basic social services, care, and support” as well as collective responsibility, involving States, communities and families as well as the private sector.
- *Sanctions*. Refraining from promulgating and applying any unilateral economic, financial, or trade measures not in accordance with international law.
- *Data*. Recognizing the need for “individual-level data”, terminology that is introduced for the first time in CSW agreed conclusions, in addressing multidimensional poverty.

We believe these updates define important standards for global and domestic economic governance norms and poverty-eradication efforts as they relate to gender equality. We note, however, that the text is silent on issues of international trade.

Climate Justice

We regret that linkages to climate change, which disproportionately affects women and girls and pushes them closer or further into poverty, were not clearly developed in the text

“Any talk about poverty eradication is not possible without us working on the defense of ourselves, other species, and the living planet. We are in a time when we have crossed 6 of the 9 planetary boundaries and are losing 200 species a day, which is a thousand times the background rate of species extinction. This is beyond urgent,” Noelene Nabulivou of Diverse Voices and Action (DIVA) for Equality Fiji, said during the press conference.

There is also a missed opportunity to clearly articulate the need for new, additional, and debt-free climate finance, particularly for Global South countries.

Echoing this demand, Nohora Alejandra Quiguntar member of the Young Feminist Caucus and the indigenous youth-led organization Tejiendo Pensamiento remarked that, “economic policies are not aligned with the protection of territories, and government budgets for climate mitigation and adaptation programs are insufficient”.

SRHR and LGBTQI equality

During negotiations, we observed significant pushback against gender-expansive language, with several Member States challenging long-established agreed language on gender in the text, including “gender-based violence”, and demonstrating little flexibility on issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Despite the pushback, references to “gender-based violence” and “sexual and reproductive health” were eventually retained in the text.

Additionally, CSW68 negotiations took place under unprecedented limitations, as the United Nations recently announced a liquidity crisis and is implementing several austerity measures, which have limited the amount of time that governments can spend negotiating. The constrained time for negotiations meant that more and more compromises had to be made. In the final days of the negotiations, we saw the text get weakened as Member States sought to produce an outcome on the last day of CSW.

Despite the challenging environment for SRHR during negotiations, we welcome the recommendations that made it into the text, such as increasing investments in health technologies, particularly digital health, reducing out-of-pocket spending, and recognizing women’s rights to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on all matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health. We deeply regret, however, that fundamental issues related to the protection of the human rights of LGBTQI people were not considered in the text.

We are increasingly concerned by the presence of anti-rights actors, organizing parallel events and mobilizations at the CSW and lobbying missions to roll back on SRHR and rights of LGBTQI people. “These actors co-opt and distort women’s, girls’, and gender-diverse people’s rights by undermining rights to bodily autonomy, including rights to safe abortion and reproductive health technologies, and deploying anti-LGBTQI and vile anti-trans rhetoric,” said Fadekemi Akinfaderin, Chief Advocacy Officer at Fòs Feminista, co-convening organization of the Women’s Rights Caucus.

As a feminist movement, we stand with all women in all their diversity, including trans, intersex, and non-binary, and we remain deeply committed to fighting this worldview that is based on inequality and denying rights with the LBTI Caucus, a co-convenor of the WRC.

“We understand gender as a spectrum of diverse identities that are not just related to gender expression and our sexual orientation, but also to all the intersectional status positions and realities in which women and girls live in different contexts and countries worldwide,” said Orneill Latiyah of Outright International and the LBTI Caucus.

We also welcome the adoption of a new HIV/AIDS resolution by the Commission during the session. This is a successful technical update of the Women, the Girl Child and HIV resolution

(CSW 60/2) that aligns it with critical global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, the 2021 Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS, and the 2025 HIV/AIDS 10-10-10 targets which are key enablers for getting on track to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. We welcome this renewed political commitment as an opportunity to close the gap between normative global policy frameworks and national policies and interventions.

On Palestine

Finally, we recognize that CSW68 happens amid an ongoing genocide in Gaza, where over 40,000 have been killed, more than half a million are on the brink of famine and 80% of the population has been displaced since October last year. While we welcome broad references made to women's and girls' conflict and post-conflict situations and the role of women and girls in peacebuilding, we regret that the agreed conclusions text could not reflect language to condemn foreign occupation and support a specific reference to a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, which had been brought up during negotiations.

"We want all wars, all colonization, and all militarization to stop immediately. Not one more life taken, not one more tree burnt, not one more river dried, and not one more square meter of land anywhere occupied," said Soudeh Rad, an Iranian-French nonbinary activist from eco-queer feminist organization, Spectrum.

However, we are encouraged to see a strong recommendation in the text that "urges all States and the specialized agencies and organizations of the United Nations system to continue to support and provide emergency assistance through mechanisms that provide vital services to women and girls living in situations of armed conflict, including those subject to acts that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide", especially given recent announcements of Member States to suspend and withdraw their funding to UNRWA

As feminists, we will continue to bear witness to the genocide in Palestine, the atrocities in Sudan and Congo, and many territories around the world, and carry the demand for a permanent ceasefire in all possible spaces for advocacy and activism.